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Helms regrets not ending CIA-Mafia tie

New York (Reuter) — Richard M. Helms, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, said in a television interview broadcast last night that he was wrong in letting the CIA stay involved with the Mafia in plotting against Fidel Castro.

Mr. Helms, in the interview with David Frost, also denied that the CIA's now well-publicized assassination plots against the Cuban leader ever got out of the laboratory-planning stage.

In the interview, televised by NBC, Mr. Helms also said he had never tried to blackmail then-President Richard M. Nixon into making him ambassador to Iran and that his successor at the CIA, William E. Colby, and former President Gerald R. Ford weakened the agency.

The interview provided Mr. Helms's first public answers to allegations of agency misdeeds during his years as head of the CIA.

On Cuba, he said that the so-called assassination attempts against Mr. Castro, including sending him lethal seashells, were "pipe dreams . . . the things never left the laboratory."

"Nothing was ever done about them," Mr. Helms added.

But Mr. Helms went on to say that one of his biggest regrets was that he did not stop the CIA's involvement with the Mafia in working against Mr. Castro, even though he denied there was any evidence to show any assassination attempt was made.

He was referring to a plot supposedly hatched in the 1960's in which gangland figure John Roselli was alleged to have been involved in a plan to use poisoned pellets to murder Mr. Castro.

Of the involvement with the Mafia, Mr. Helms said, "When I found out about it, I should have corked it off and stopped it right then and there, and I am genuinely sorry that I didn't . . . It was a mistake. It was a case of poor judgment."

"On the other hand, let's not exaggerate what was involved there. There never was the slightest evidence produced, that I know of, that any poisoned pellets ever even got to Havana."

"We have the word of a gangster that they did, but we have no record, no evidence, no nothing, and I don't believe it," he said.

Mr. Helms said that all he ever authorized was an attempt by Roselli to see if any Mafia contacts still were working in Havana. "I shouldn't have authorized even that," he said.

Questioned further by Mr. Frost as to whether the CIA or any American agency should consider assassination as a political tool, he said: "Assassination is not a way for the American government. It is not a way for the CIA."

"I was never in favor of it. Murder will out. It will always, eventually, leak around in some fashion that it was done."

Mr. Helms vehemently denied reports that he blackmailed President Nixon into appointing him ambassador to Iran.

"I was never one of those presidential appointees that thought he had an entitlement to a job. . . . I never, by word, deed, action or innuendo, threatened President Nixon with anything, ever."

The former CIA director blamed former President Ford and Mr. Colby, who has since retired from the CIA, for weakening the agency by allowing too much material about its covert work to be made public.

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